

**BN busing people for votes, at taxpayers' expense...**

**MalaysiaKini.com**

**February 5, 2013**

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COMMENT Will the busing of potential voters help BN win the 13th general election?

This is questionable because the Indians who were ferried by buses to Kuala Lumpur to celebrate Ponggal at Dataran Merdeka felt cheated.

Pocket money was promised, and some got RM100, others RM50 or RM10 and several hundred others no pocket money at all.

Several of those who came said they were lured to come to Kuala Lumpur because they could visit the Batu Caves, see Little India and celebrate Ponggal with Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and other MIC leaders.

Eager and enthusiastic leaders distributed cash, unevenly, and the middlemen pocketed the money to enrich themselves. These were the complaints of the people coming from other towns and cities, in more than 100 buses.

According to Bernama, more than 100,000 people from all over the peninsula attended the Ponggal celebration at Dataran Merdeka on Feb 2.

One newspaper reported that about 30,000 attended, while several others estimated lesser crowds. To make up the numbers, schoolchildren were also brought in by the busloads.

A large crowd is no reflection of Indian support for MIC or the BN. What is more important is connecting with the grassroots. The cash gifts and bus trips to Kuala Lumpur just before the general election is open to suspicion and the voters of today are not blind.

Ponggal is actually a harvest festival celebrated in Tamil Nadu in South India, marking the end of the harvest season. However, this event at Dataran Merdeka was a harvest of a different kind - the tapping of voters.

This is not the first time BN has organised events bringing busloads of people to venues of celebrations. In Kuala Selangor and Semenyih, where people were also brought in by the busloads and when hampers were given out, there were stampedes and some Indians were severely hurt and bruised.

A fair and just way to attract voters?

Several 'nambikei' (trust me) events ran into millions of ringgit. The question being asked is whether this is a fair and just way to attract voters. To the ordinary man, it appears very dubious and devious.

At the Feb 2 Dataran Merdeka Ponggal gathering, Najib pledged that he would not disappoint the expectations and aspirations the Indian community have in the BN government.

While he was making these comments, the disappointed Indians from all around the peninsula were comparing how much they got in allowances and complaining how they were conned into visiting Batu Caves and Little India.

Several of them claimed that they had lost all trust (nambikei) in the government. A public relations effort to woo voters is not going to work and BN has to realise that voters in this era are of a different psyche.

These voters generally feel that events such as the Ponggal gathering are a waste of money and this expenditure is made as a eleventh hour effort to woo voters.

A 17-year-old student from Malacca who attended the event said: "Anyway, the money the government was giving out is taxpayers' money."

In the midst of gripping the Indians at the Dataran, Najib said: "I will ensure that the Indian community will enjoy a better future, just like the other communities in the country."

Discussion and dissent must be allowed

An Indian in the crowd told his friend, "All this while we are not treated equally and now to ensure votes Najib is saying that we will be treated like the other communities in this democratic country."

Said an academician, a professor of Indian origin: "For a progressive and democratic Malaysia, debate, discussion and dissent must be allowed for voters to make a fair decision as to which party to vote for.

"If the mainstream media and government-run broadcast stations only allow BN news, then the voters will be disappointed."

Among the VIPs at the Dataran gathering were Najib's wife Rosmah Mansor, MIC president G Palanivel, Information, Communications and Culture Minister Dr Rais Yatim, Federal Territories and Urban Well-Being deputy minister M Saravanan and Malaysia's Special Envoy (Infrastructure) to India and South Asia S Samy Vellu (left).

Hours earlier, in Petaling Jaya, Selangor Menteri Besar Khalid Ibrahim launched the first hostel in Malaysia for the children of estate workers.

It is to be built on an eight-hectare land in Ijok and is expected to house 100 children to allow them to concentrate on their studies, said Khalid, adding that studies have shown that students staying in hostels could improve their studies by 50 percent.

In the 2008 general election, MIC won only three of the nine MP seats it contested. Now, how much will it win in the coming general election? And, if it wins all the parliamentary seats it contests, then perhaps its busing trips would have been translated into votes.

Most of all what do the voters want in a government? Voters want a fair, just, democratic, transparent, responsible and capable government that does not favour any particular community.

What is more crucial is for the government to walk the talk. Winning the hearts and minds of the people is more important than bus trips. Why are Indians more important now?

Is this because the government has failed, over the last four years, to satisfy the Indians? But, be rest assured that any amount of cash handouts is not going to translate to votes for MIC or the BN.

The whole psyche and attitude of voters has matured and changed because Malaysians are saying: "It is our money that the government is giving back to us. Your handout is not going to influence our decision. So what's the big deal?"

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Source: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/220725>